

## Infertility

Many North Americans move comfortably from one chapter of life to the next with each page of the journey unfolding as planned. Occasionally something—a broken marriage, cancer, mental illness, addiction—comes along to wake people up to the reality that life is not fair and cannot always be controlled. Infertility awakened me.

Delbert and I planned college, marriage, career and finances, all with intentions of starting our family at the perfect time. An easy pregnancy came a few months before our fifth anniversary; everything was falling into place just as we'd imagined it would. A miscarriage, an ectopic pregnancy six months later, difficulty conceiving, and three more miscarriages followed over the next five years.

Around us, siblings, friends and acquaintances started and added to their families with apparent ease. We felt alone and out of control. Doubt, fear and anger challenged us, affecting everything from our daily routines to our ability to make long-term plans. Relationships with friends and family were strained.

RESOLVE, Inc., a national support and resource network for people experiencing infertility, defines infertility as the inability to conceive or sustain a pregnancy. About 1 million U.S. couples seek infertility treatment annually. Most of them have little support as they trudge through a confusing, energy-sapping maze of ethical and financial decisions, as well as painful and humiliating medical procedures.

Now, finally a mother, I can say that I learned some valuable lessons from my journey with infertility. But they are not lessons I would have chosen to learn. Infertility shook me to my core and continues to shape how I experience God, church, people and life's ups and downs.

One of the most devastating aspects of infertility is trying to put the experience together with an understanding of God. Several authors in this issue share their experience with faith and infertility.

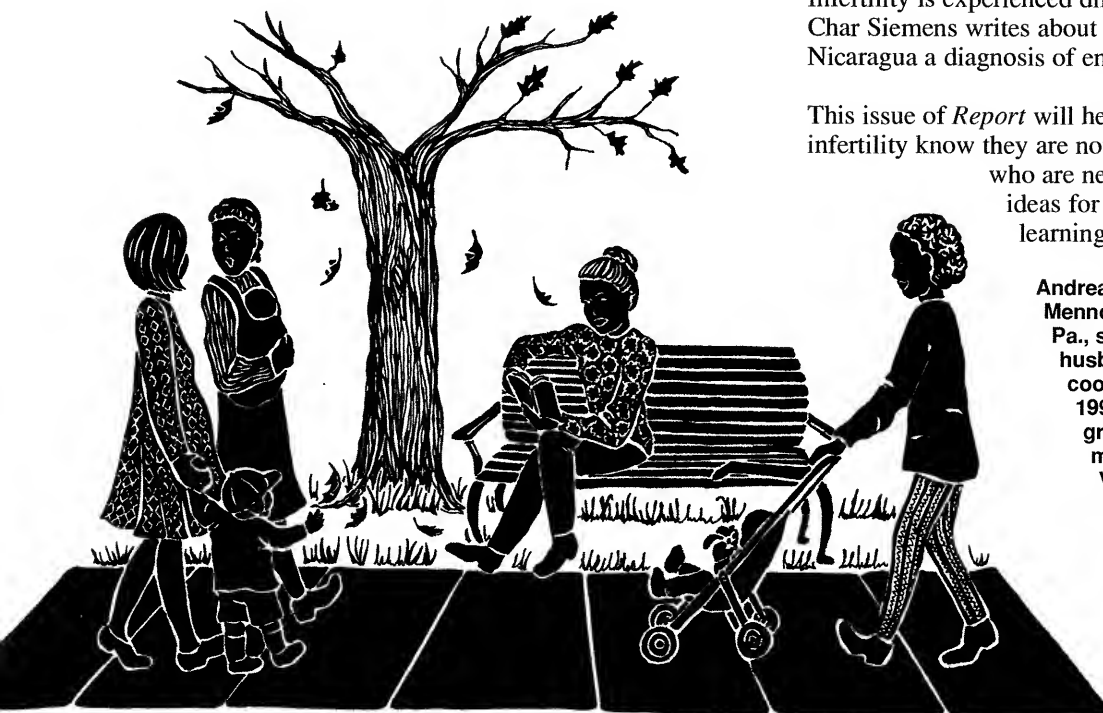
Infertility is lonely, confusing and requires lots of decision making. Lorraine Stutzman-Amstutz writes about an infertility support group experience.

Infertility has a ripple effect. Anne, a contributor who chooses to remain anonymous, shares about how infertility's tentacles reached into her marriage, family and church relationships.

Infertility is experienced differently in different cultures. Char Siemens writes about processing with friends in Nicaragua a diagnosis of endometriosis.

This issue of *Report* will help those who are dealing with infertility know they are not alone. It will also educate those who are new to the subject and provide ideas for supporting people who are learning to cope with this issue.

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by Brenda Tiessen-Wiens

## Why was Hannah infertile? (and other pertinent questions)

*In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. And she made a vow, saying "O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a (child) then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, no razor will ever be used on his head." As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine." "Not so my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying out of my great anguish and grief." 1 Samuel 1:10-7 (RSV)*

Several months ago I read an article titled "Why was Hannah Infertile?" Author Dr. Bernard Corenblum, M.D., explained that Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-20) must have been overweight because Elkanah gave her a "double portion" of food. Obesity, apparently, is the most common cause of anovulation, which is the most common cause of infertility. According to Corenblum, Hannah's infertility caused her stress which, presumably, caused her to lose weight and become pregnant. I was flabbergasted, outraged, insulted. It seemed to me that having a medical point to make and finding a biblical text to substantiate it demonstrated poor biblical exegesis.

But good things can come from ridiculous assertions. For starters, I began reading my Bible to see what it really said. I hoped to find stories that might help me understand my own experience with infertility and show me a way through it. I was pleased to discover that many of the "important" women in the Bible were infertile. Consider Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah and Elizabeth. Quite the company to keep! On the other hand, to my distress, what brought them significance was their subsequent pregnancy and giving birth to a male son who later went on to do great things. I doubted I'd soon be joining their ranks.

Sunday morning theology has provided little direction in interpreting the biblical text. It has been particularly harmful with its misguided assertions about God's promises. In church we have yet to move beyond literal biblical understandings that insist God has the power and will to open and close wombs, that God hears the prayers of one in distress and then "remembers" them. A prominent theme of this type of undiscerning theology tells us that God rewards the prayers of the faithful. The words of good church folk to "leave it in God's hands" and accept "this is God's will for your life" do little to comfort or nurture a healthy faith.

Worship experiences for the infertile are not without their moments of testing for graciousness and patience. Last fall we had a service based on the stories of several early martyrs. Trev and I were asked to be the couple into whose arms Anneken Jans thrusts her infant child as she is dragged off to be burned at the stake. Five years ago I would have agreed to such a simple request without a thought. Now, however, it turned into a huge dilemma with all kinds of emotional implications.

During Advent I was asked to read Scripture, Elizabeth's story of wonder and celebration. It was not a celebrative text for me nor for friends who recently experienced a miscarriage. January rolled around and I was asked to speak on the story of Elisha and the Shunammite woman whose hospitality was rewarded with the announcement "About this time next year . . . you will hold a son in your arms." (2 Kings 4:16). I declined the invitation.

Most people are unaware how seasons of the church year affect the infertile. I will always skip church on Mother's Day, and I'll always hope that maybe this year they aren't lauding the sacrifices of mothers with disregard for how incomplete it makes me feel to hear the message that I don't quite measure up. What can I do to convince them that I can fully know what it means to be a woman without being a mother?

I will always skip a service or two at Christmas, with its quaint celebration stories of pregnancy, expectation and birth. Instead, I will take some quiet time, touching my pain and planning how to make it through the next family gathering. It will be a long time before I have the courage to



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whole people at the end of it all.

Oddly enough, in some ways we feel privileged. We have been given the time to consider whether parenting is right for us, a decision I believe many people don't actually make, but merely assume. We feel incredible risk, yet adventure, in the possibility of remaining child-free. We accept—but haven't always been good at—our role in educating family and friends about infertility. They find it confusing when we suggest they consider what it may mean for our ongoing relationships if we don't have children. I sometimes wonder if they are just waiting for us to "catch up" or if they can accept who we are choosing to be. I believe we will accept our decisions long before they stop wondering "Why didn't they adopt?" "Why didn't they try herbs?" (i.e. "Why didn't they listen to me?")

With such cultural and societal differences between biblical times and our own, there are lots of reasons to write off what the Bible says regarding infertility. There are many reasons to turn our backs on the empty promises of church, family and friends and their inadequacy in responding to pain of such a personal nature. Yet in the Bible I read of Hannah who struggled intensely with infertility. She knew my pain. I read of the Shunammite woman who received a gift when she least expected it, when she was already comfortable with who she was and no longer looked to a child to fulfil her emotional needs. How we read these stories makes a difference. We can read of and pray to the God of the Magic Wand or we can discover the God of Providence. One holds empty promises while the other helps me see a variety of directions for the future, with promises of wholeness in each path.

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attend a child dedication service, although I have all kinds of ideas about how it could be done. I long for the day when sermons, congregational songs and especially children's stories help people find wholeness and fulfillment in who they are and not as fulfillers of certain roles to which varying values have been ascribed.

I recall the time when I was very angry about experiencing infertility. Some of the anger was directed at specific people and conversations (that I can still repeat verbatim), and some was directed at my church. I felt betrayed by the church that gave me faith but then tied it to roles as wife and mother. I longed to share my pain with church friends, yet month after month chose rather to withdraw, create facades and hide my pain. I felt unfaithful to myself and to my beliefs about community. I struggle with those who want to describe our church as a "family church." Is there room there for me and for other people who don't have traditional families? I struggle with the term "Mother God," but not for the usual reasons!

I wish there were easy answers to God's role in all of this. Trev and I have gone through one stimulation and two thaw cycles with in vitro fertilization. During those times we were reminded by family and friends that they were praying for us. I was immeasurably humbled by this, but by the time of our third embryo transfer was increasingly skeptical about what I expected from prayer and from God. Did God actually have the power or will to change our situation? I felt "forgotten." Then, in one fleeting moment when I heard "We're praying for you," I thought, "I hope you're praying for the right thing." I realized I was no longer asking God for a child. Instead, my prayers were that God would see us through this, give us confidence and assurance in the decisions we were making, but most of all, help us to be

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by Terri J. Plank Brenneman

## Labor pains of hope

Biting my bottom lip I kept the pain from spewing out my mouth. A scream building inside my lungs was barely contained. Intense feelings would not form themselves into coherent words, so I suffered silently through the Sunday school class.

We were examining the story of Hannah: her barrenness, her impassioned prayer, her promise to give her son to God, her giving of birth and song of triumph. I had worked through the passage before with regard to my own infertility . . . Why such an extreme reaction to the story now?

Around and around in my mind ran the question, "What do you want from me, God?" I had prayed, begged, cried, been prayed over and anointed. Was God asking me to "give" my child over to God's service? Was it because of her bargain

that Hannah received what she desired? How would I do that in today's world? Of course I would dedicate my child to God; was there something more? I wondered what God was demanding of me before granting my prayer request.

Reflecting on Hannah's success only deepened my pain. Not knowing how to translate my experience into sensible thoughts, I shut down emotionally and spiritually to survive the hour—a common occurrence in the infertility ordeal.

I had begun my infertility diagnosis and treatment process a year earlier. As I did, I began to talk about my experience publicly, using Isaiah 54, "Sing, O barren one . . . Enlarge your tent," as my theme for a women's retreat. I shared my jealousy and hurt with friends who were popping out babies one after the other. Women in several settings gathered around and prayed for me. Breaking the silence with others forced me to break the silence with God. I had shut out God rather than deal with the disappointment and anger I felt.

My first lesson from Hannah was to turn toward the pain rather than push it away. Her example of crying out to God in a fashion that caused the priest to question her mental stability gave me confidence to begin to cry out. Prior to this I concentrated on temperature readings, counting days, ovulation tests, sex on demand . . . all the things I could control. But infertility was something beyond my control. I couldn't "make" my body get pregnant. No amount of prayer, visualization, relaxation, nutrition, sexual positions or hormones made a difference. After years of silence I poured out my heart and soul to God acknowledging my deep desire for a child, to be pregnant. By turning toward the pain I faced that which I dreaded the most: disappointment.

As I wrestled with God over this loss, I gained a new understanding of God's love and care. Love is not dependent on God giving me what I desire. Rather, God's promise is to be with me and love me through whatever reality I face, even in the loss of my own child as God lost God's own son. Blessings from God are gifts, not entitlements; I don't "deserve" or "earn" God's blessings, no matter how good I am. God



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does not always give us what we want. While there is no wrong in the "wanting," we are not entitled or guaranteed to receive everything we desire.

About two months before the Sunday school class on Hannah, I had undergone a laparoscopy, the final procedure in my diagnostic work-up. The results: my body was fine; there was no known reason for not getting pregnant. Our case was one of the 11 percent diagnosed as "unexplained infertility." Relieved on one hand that there would be no more tests, I was discouraged by the ultimate uncontrollability of the outcome. My age and our financial situation made in vitro fertilization nearly impossible. Where to go from here was the question facing me. Hannah's story seemed to be saying I needed to make a promise to God, but I didn't know what, and I didn't know how.

A short time later another Sunday school class focused on delineating values and setting goals for the next year. I reflected quietly and felt God nudging me to move on beyond loss to the parenthood option of adoption. My prayer for the year became a desire to be opened and to begin to make room in my heart and life to be an adoptive parent. The struggle continued as I began to grieve the loss of our biological child, the dreamed-for child with Jim's eyes and my smile, with our combined musical ability, our personality blend. This loss hit me hard one Children's Day at church as a 5-year old sang her solo into the microphone: we'll never get a chance to see our own flesh and blood grow and develop. Why God, when others terminate the life of their unwanted child? Why?

For some losses there are no reasons. I could choose to be bitter and resentful for the circumstance or allow God to work in me to grow in new and unexpected ways. Each painful grief experience became a new lesson in faith. As I confronted the losses, my heart softened and healed. Yet I found myself still resisting the adoption.

The next step of faith was sharing my felt "no" to adoption with my husband. I knew it would cause him pain. I also knew I couldn't move on until I acknowledged with him the part of me that still held onto the desire for our own child. Meanwhile, my husband was forging ahead, feeling the time crunch and wanting to get the adoption moving. We hit an impasse where we were polarized and resisting one another.

On an anniversary trip away from our everyday routine we confronted the issue. The more I resisted, the more Jim pressured, the more I resisted and on and on the cycle went. Both of us were frustrated and hurt.

As we dissected the dynamic we discovered we were both dealing with pain in our unique styles. Jim's way of handling loss is to do something, move ahead, "buck up" and get on with it. Mine is to close the door for a while, shut down and process slowly. When Jim shared his tears over the loss of our "dream child" a shift occurred inside me. Able to share the feelings of shame that accompanied my "no," I feared others saw me as less of a woman with my reservations about adoptive parenting. In that moment of mutual pain, God worked on another level of healing, drawing us closer to one another and opening us to accept the desires and wishes of the other.

After that encounter, we became more active in the adoption application process. Then we received a call, completely outside our agency, about a baby being born in approximately eight weeks. We were catapulted into a whole new faith experience. We're still in the midst of this one. Will this really happen? Will we be parents at last? If not, then what is God's message to us? Even as I write we are awaiting the call to participate in the birth of this precious gift.

This new leg of our journey is teaching me an even greater lesson in faith. The faith of others is critical to my own faith. When we announced to our church our hopeful expectation, I was astonished at the number of persons who said, "I've been praying for a child for you every day." That was something I'd given up long ago. The outpouring of support with getting our home ready, financing the adoption, supplying our needs and continuing to pray is tangible evidence of God's gifts of love and grace. These are gifts I may never have recognized except in response to this struggle. What we could not do on our own is possible through the faith of the community.

Facing all the unknowns feels more bearable because of the presence, love and faith of others, whatever the outcome. This is truly God's love and care for me at work.

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**"I stopped believing in a God who would bless me if I did all the right things. I began the process of learning to appreciate the body I had indeed been blessed with."**

  
by Sandra Franklin

## Insights on faith and infertility

I was the daughter of a Church of the Brethren minister in what I understood to be one of the more theologically conservative congregations in the denomination. I always thought of myself as being on the edge of what was considered theologically safe ground in that context, full of lots of questions and doubt on doctrine and biblical interpretation.

At about age 16, my menstrual cycles began to be sporadic, ranging from three- to eight-month intervals, until my mother took me to my first gynecological visit. The only thing I remember is the doctor announcing that everything was fine and that I shouldn't be concerned "until you want to have children." In that moment I felt lucky, blessed to be free of the monthly "worry." I felt as if this gift suited my personality and way of being as a teen-ager—carefree, active in sports and other school activities and involved with the church youth group.

At some point however, this began to feel different. I felt as if I didn't belong when conversations focused on cramps, PMS and even schedules for planning summer trips to the beach at appropriate times of the months. Getting married was also traumatic because I feared that at some point my husband would reject me because I would not be able to bear children. I started to feel uncomfortable at mother-daughter banquets and in attending a church that stressed the women's place as being at home as a mother. Also, as I grew older, my cycles became more and more irregular. Eventually, I felt less "blessed" and more cursed—a misfit, odd, not "fully" female.

I'm not sure when my faith began to be affected. I do not even think I knew it was until 1993, when my husband and I finally made the decision to face our infertility and delve into understanding and resolving the issue that kept us, and me in particular, from being able to make long-term decisions about our lives. It was in the midst of this that we attended a RESOLVE seminar (a nationwide infertility resource network), whose guest speaker was our infertility specialist. He had always made it clear to us that he wasn't

God; that he would do what he could within his control to help us have a child, but that we needed to maintain a belief in the miraculous, that we were not (nor was he) in control of the outcome.

At the seminar, however, I heard more that helped me to understand my own background. At one time the speaker said he had believed that if he was a good person who strived to do right, and indeed did everything he could to make something happen, it would happen, that God favors those who are "good" and who do the right thing. He encouraged those attending the seminar to disengage themselves from that life philosophy and theology. At that moment, I understood that the faith that I was taught growing up had slowly been eating away at me during my adult years.

I, like my doctor, had grown up with a theology of right living: God blesses us when we are good; if we have enough faith and live a good Christian life, God answers prayer and blesses us; a good Christian woman is subservient to her husband; the hierarchy is God the Father, Jesus, man, woman. I was surprised, however, when I began to realize, in the midst of my confrontation with my own infertility, that underneath all the layers that make me who I am, I had believed that the above words were true. There were moments when, like Hannah, I made vows to God if he would "remember me." I begged to know what I had done wrong to deserve being infertile. I shouted "What do You want from me?" I even thought that if I could just believe in the hierarchy of God and humanity that I had been taught, and be a little more domestic and a better housewife, I would find favor with God.

Gradually, during our year of intensive work with a specialist, I started peeling away the layers that had been built up around being in control of my body and my God. I stopped believing in a God who would bless me if I did all the right things. I began the process of learning to appreciate the body I had indeed been blessed with. I started to understand that God cared what happened to me even when I wasn't doing the right thing or praying the right prayer. I began to feel God in new ways, not as a being that I could manipulate through my behavior, but as a God who would be with me in my pain.



I first experienced this in a real way as I was in recovery from a laparoscopy. As I lay there after what is considered minor surgery, but which I experienced as yet another hurdle in the process, my first sense was of being embraced in God's arms. I also understood that God had indeed been there the whole time, even as I screamed out in my anger and rage to make my body whole. I stopped feeling guilty for all the things I had mentally listed that had "caused" my infertility; slowly my list of sins became smaller.



After years of growing up with a God whom I believe I was taught to manipulate by being "good" (a good Christian, a good wife, a good woman), I no longer have what then seemed to be a clear picture of what God is "supposed" to do (i.e., prevent bad things from happening to us, if we are good). Resolution of my infertility came for me when I conceived and gave birth to Rehana Joy; and more recently, with a spontaneous conception that I hope delivers safely this fall. However, I believe that neither of these pregnancies occurred because I did something right in the eyes of God. I could have just as easily lived exactly the same life and made the same choices, not conceived and have reached a different resolution.

While attending the May 1996 Wind & Fire conference in Winnipeg, Man., I witnessed a dramatic portrayal of Hannah's story. I cannot forget that portrayal, not because of the outcome of the story, but because of the drama of the pain, the struggle and the joy and the sense that God always loved and was with Hannah.

I believe that Hannah's desire (my own) and prayer (my own) to God to bear a child was a legitimate prayer; God wants to be there for us, is with us. I discovered in my walk with infertility, that I have a lot of layers of notions about who God is, what God should do for me, and I for God in order to make our relationship work (and for me to get what I want!), to be a woman loved by God. What I saw in the portrayal of Hannah's story (and experienced in my own walk), however, was a God who listened to pain, desires, joys and rage and loved me through all.

I remember the notion of grace being taught in my church while I was growing up; however, somewhere in all the trimmings concerned with how I must live to be in relationship with God, I discovered that it had lost its place in my faith. Through my journey with infertility, I believe I am rediscovering this notion and therefore have rediscovered the God that is with us, who weeps with us, laughs with us and finds resolutions with us.

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"Life wasn't fair! I would be a good mother!"



"We sat on back patios and discussed raging unemployment in our community, the best way to cook rice and beans, and the gringa who was unable to conceive. It was not a sense of shame; it was the reality of my life."

by Char Siemens

## Infertility in another culture

"Don't forget to pack the stove irons, I'll be back in about an hour." With those words I ran out of the house. Jon was at home packing our camping equipment and backpacks, preparing for our six-week hiking and biking trip in the States. When I got back from the doctor's, we would head off.

As I sat in the office waiting for my name to be called, I pondered what the next few months would hold. Picnicking on mountain tops, straining our bodies to hike those extra five kilometers to the peak, and at night falling into the tent exhausted. All too soon our travels would be over and we would be packing our bags again. We had just signed up for an MCC term in Nicaragua. My thoughts ran rampant; excitement mingled with fear and apprehension. I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I barely heard the nurse say, "Charlotte, room two please."

I looked at my watch. We were already behind schedule and our trip hadn't even started. At least I could get the mandatory MCC check-up out of the way. It would be one less thing to worry about once we came back from our vacation.

We chatted away as the examination proceeded. Suddenly the doctor looked concerned; my internal examination elicited distress. That afternoon we waited at the specialist's office instead of waiting at the Canada-U.S. border crossing before we cruised across the prairie. During the examination, the specialist casually handed me Kleenexes as he explained the possibilities. I was scheduled for surgery a week later. I was overwhelmed; endometriosis was a word I had never encountered before, and now I was praying that I had this dreaded disease instead of the alternative: cancer.

The week before surgery I did extensive reading about endometriosis. Infertility had never crossed my mind; I was physically active and strong. Readings and discussions with our family doctor forced us to reconsider our carefully laid plans regarding family, the start of our MCC term in Nicaragua and our own relationship. The removal of two



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massive cysts, caused by endometrial cells, caused both physical and emotional pain. Surgery confirmed my suspicions that I might not be able to conceive.

I was devastated! My body had let me down, even after I had taken such good care of it. All the years of using birth control seemed like a cruel joke. Life wasn't fair! I would be a good mother!

Two months after surgery we left for Nicaragua. I was still grieving as my tongue struggled with Spanish verb conjugation at language school. In our small village people were surprised that a 30-year-old woman didn't have a troop of children following her. They openly questioned why we didn't have children. There were no silent whispers among church members wondering whether we didn't have children by choice or by circumstance.

Initially I was horrified at their questions. Didn't these people know this was a private matter? But I soon began to see it as a form of healing. We sat on back patios and discussed raging unemployment in our community, the best way to cook rice and beans, and the gringa who was unable to conceive. It was not a sense of shame; it was the reality of my life.

I looked around me and saw the realities of others' lives. One neighbor didn't always have enough food for her children and as a result, their growth was stunted. Another had just lost his job and struggled to make ends meet. The local school principal longed for paper and pencils so the children could copy their lessons.

I desperately wanted children; as a woman, I felt I had a right to conceive. My friends also had rights: the right to obtain work, the right of a decent education and the right for a dignified life. None of those rights were completely realized. Our North American culture, especially our media,

likes us to believe that all our needs and rights will be actualized and that we control our destinies and our fate. My neighbor taught me that God is in control, and we are given grace to deal with the realities of our lives, even if they are not of our choosing.

Today I am the mother of two beautiful boys. Daniel joined our family while we were living in Teustepe, Nicaragua, and last summer Jon, Daniel and I spent a month in Nicaragua finalizing adoption proceedings for Carlos. Before we left on our MCC assignment, we clearly stated that we wanted to start a family during our term. Our plans were changed as to how that was to happen, but life does not always come in the packages we design. We are deeply grateful for the gift of our children. Watching our boys grow fills us with wonder and thankfulness.

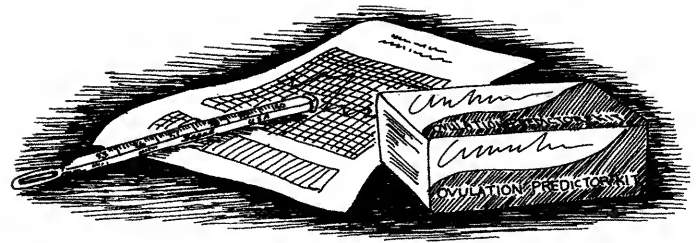
My desire to conceive has not left me; I don't think it ever will. I resent the fact that my body let me down, that I am unable to conceive. Some weeks it seems like every woman I meet is pregnant. I realize there will be occasional tearful moments during child dedications or when I'm holding a newborn. These celebrations in others' lives reinforce the disappointment in mine.

The reality of my life is that I will never physically give birth to a child. However, emotionally and spiritually we have given life to our children, and they to us. Because I dealt with the issues in another culture, infertility conjures up memories of friends, who unknowingly made me face unresolved physical and spiritual issues in my life. I am thankful for their honesty and friendship during a difficult period in my life.

My journey with infertility is a continual reminder that I am not in control of my life. I trust that God will continue to give me grace during the difficult times of acceptance and hear my prayers of gratitude as we rejoice in the gifts of our children.

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"While perhaps inwardly becoming less and less hopeful, he felt the pressure to remain strong and stable as I wavered to and fro in the seas of hormones and treatments."



## Infertility as a family experience

### *Effect on "Dale" and I*

Growing up playing house, I remember being particularly eager to play the role of mommy. The thought was never "If I become a mommy . . ." but "When I become a mommy . . ." Many years later when we married, I was ready to settle down and begin our family much sooner than Dale was. He suggested that we already were a family, and wanted to wait until we'd been married a couple years. I reluctantly agreed, all the while counting the days.

After three years, the time had finally come to begin "our family." I had settled into a rather unfulfilling job, knowing that I would need to quit soon when I became pregnant. And the long, long wait began. To our complete shock, nothing happened. Doctor visits only gave false hopes that this or that drug would surely help; they didn't. Slowly, our denial that we had a problem turned into the horrible realization that for us having a baby was not going to be easy.

As most of my friends had their first, and then second babies, I was plagued with haunting questions: "What have I done to deserve this?" "Have I blocked out memories of sexual abuse and that's why I cannot conceive?" "Do I just need to read the Bible more?" "Doesn't God hear me?" I became deeply angry and depressed. Everywhere I looked, I saw mothers with babies. Even the birds were having babies.

Unable to cope with the pain of our unexplained and infuriating infertility any longer, we decided to take a break from medical treatment. And in a first step to find an identity other than "mommy," I entered graduate school. Again, I was secretly planning to have to drop out "when I became pregnant." The time of healing physically, emotionally and spiritually was invaluable.

Even though never a day or even an hour passed that I was not somehow aware of our infertility, I finally had something I could control: graduate school. I threw myself into my classes and internships and in many ways became a new person. With the ever-approaching graduation date, however, I was again reminded that another milestone was approaching without becoming pregnant. And just to add to

my pain, the graduation ceremonies were scheduled for Mother's Day, that awful day we infertile women all wish would just drop off our calendars and into our recycling bins.

Infertility has also struck my husband, Dale, to his very core. While he may not have played "house" while growing up, he too always assumed the ability to father children. He looked forward to having a son or daughter to carry on his family name. A child to be proud of—a child to call him "daddy." Dale remained hopeful and optimistic throughout most of our years of being "fertility challenged."

Being an engineer at heart, he approached the whole thing analytically, as something to be fixed. He was confused by the emotional roller coaster I was on within each menstrual cycle, and he often became deeply frustrated by not being able to solve the problem. Bewildered, Dale could only stand by as evidence of our infertility was manifested in my body, as I took countless trips to the doctor and endured medical treatments. He could only watch the dreaded home pregnancy test once again tell us we had failed. While perhaps inwardly becoming less and less hopeful, he felt the pressure to remain strong and stable as I wavered to and fro in the seas of hormones and treatments. Not wanting to add to my pain, his sadness and anger remained masked.

With more medical testing, the diagnosis finally came. And the blow hit hard. I cried. I screamed. I wailed. And I gave up. No more treatment. We aren't willing to go the next steps of medical treatment. The physical and emotional costs are just too high for us.

### *Effect on our marriage*

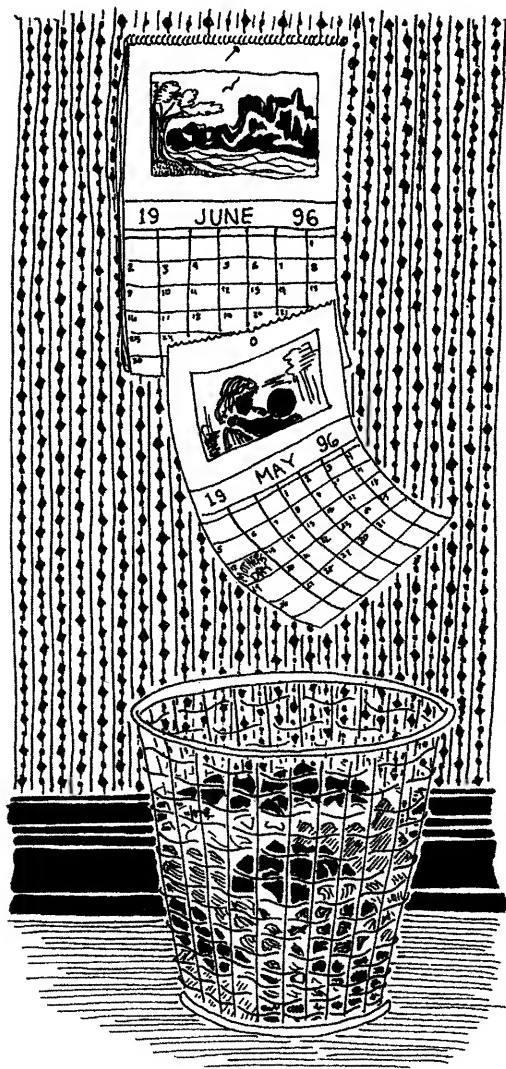
Our marriage has been deeply affected through this ordeal. We are not the same hopeful, confident young adults who married seven years ago. Perhaps in retrospect, we will be able to point to the ways in which our relationship has grown through dealing with infertility, but this is yet to be seen.

As most couples who are deciding when to start their family or when to have that second child, Dale and I have often been at very different places from each other. First I wanted to have a child much sooner than he did. Then Dale was finally getting excited about it, and I'd grown weary of trying. Communication became increasingly laborious as we sank into the mires of never-ending decisions, of examining still again why we want children. Eventually, just the mention of the "I" word caused us to shudder.

**A sexual relationship that was once a joyful, free expression of our love for each other became a mechanical ritual of baby-making.**

Our level of intimacy has also been affected dramatically. A sexual relationship that was once a joyful, free expression of our love for each other became a mechanical ritual of baby-making. Sex must be performed and not enjoyed. It must be done on certain days and not on others. It must be talked about with our doctors, even scheduled by them. Our friends secretly wondered if our infertility is a "sexual problem" rather than a medical or physical problem; with time, we wondered this ourselves.

Just at a time when my husband and I needed each other the most, infertility threatened to tear us apart. As with other couples, infertility was one of the first major challenges to face us as a married couple. We haven't had decades of experience of making decisions together, of comforting one another, of learning how to communicate with each other.



Before infertility, we had settled into a sort of relationship pattern in which we took turns being strong, supporting and encouraging the other. But what do we do when we're both feeling vulnerable and hopeless? We came to understand how infertility more often tears marriages apart than strengthens them. As we learned of couples whose struggle with infertility had ended in divorce, Dale and I became more and more determined to make our marriage work. We have had to put a higher priority on remaining good friends within our marriage than on always getting our way, even above having a child.

### *Effect on our family*

Even though we live hundreds of miles from our families, they too have been marred by our infertility. I am the oldest of three children, married first, and always assumed that I would have the first grandchild. I hadn't realized the power behind this assumption until my younger sister called to say that she and her husband were expecting their first child. Again, I kicked and screamed and fumed and yelled at God.

Although aware of our struggles, my sister and her husband have not known how to deal with our pain, and so for a time communication broke down between us. My mother could not understand why I couldn't just be happy for my sister. I could only be furious. How can I expect a mother who would never talk with me about the changes in my adolescent body to be able to talk with me now about our inability to have a child? As my younger brother and his wife also move towards beginning their family, I must learn to separate my anger and insecurity from their right to be joyful parents. To their credit, my family did become more supportive and understanding once I actually received a "label" to the medical problem causing my infertility.

My husband's family, too, has been inept at helping us. I guess they believe that ignoring it will make it go away, or that infertility is too private to discuss. I do know the intensity of emotions bound up with our infertility is more than they can bear. So, pretending that Dale and I fit the normal family pattern—which we certainly don't—they leave us to find our own path.

Once I did share with Dale's older sister. Although she has five children, I thought she might understand. I talked of our struggles to become pregnant. Although visibly uncomfortable, she seemed eager to listen and showed

genuine care and compassion. A few months later, however, she called to say that she had been pregnant during our discussion, and that they were expecting their sixth child. We've not spoken again about infertility.

### *Effect on our church*

In many ways, our church is our family. And as with any family, our church has helped bring us comfort and healing, as well as added pain. In church, we find reminders of our childlessness everywhere. We sit through children's stories, watching the cute, adorable babies of our friends grow up to be rambunctious and curious children. All the special services of the year seem to focus on children: the Christ-child in the manger, children waving palm branches on Palm Sunday, children paying tribute to their parents on Mother's and Father's Days.

At times, the language of church is more than I can bear. God is my parent? How can I understand what it means to be a parent? Will I ever be one? One phrase spoken at the beginning of worship can cloud the rest of the service. One Advent service the worship leader said, "We are pregnant with the spirit of anticipation." Poof! I was out of worship and into self-pity the rest of that day. And yet how can I expect the whole church to dance around our pain, to deny that children are an integral part of our church? I cannot.

Our church has also been a never-ending source of strength. They've stood by us in our month-after-month-after-month struggle. They've heard our story; they are part of our story. They weep with us; they hope with us. And we lean heavily on them. They too feel hopeless, not knowing what they can do, but they have been Christ to us with their listening ears, broad shoulders, and caring arms. Knowing and thoughtful eye contact from someone in the congregation is all it often takes to get me through yet another pregnancy announcement.

Whether we like it or not, infertility will always be a part of our story. We will never be the same. Our families will never be the same. We can only hold onto the hope that God does care. He has plans to prosper us, and not to harm us. He plans to give us hope and a future (paraphrase of Jeremiah 29:11).

**"Anne," the author, wishes to remain anonymous. She is the co-founder of a support group for couples dealing with infertility. She and her husband are now pursuing adoption.**



by Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz

## **Infertility, ethics and advanced reproductive technologies**

The radiology technician walked into the room as I lay on the table after my ultrasound and very matter-of-factly stated "Well, it looks like you won't be having any children." I called into work and said I couldn't be there for the rest of the day. I went home and sat in my apartment alone and cried. I was a single, 23-year-old woman and while I wasn't even certain I wanted to have children, I remember thinking, "Now I have no choice."

My family doctor, a woman, was horrified when I told her my story and forcefully stated, "I'll have that man's job." The validation I felt for my raw emotions sustained me through numerous times of doubt, confusion and uncertainty in the months to come.

I was diagnosed with endometriosis when I was a junior in college. The diagnosis came as a relief after a number of years of excruciating menstrual pain. I discovered endometriosis was known as the "career woman's disease" and that there was no known cure but a variety of treatment plans. The most dramatic treatment that in some cases seemed to "cure" the disease was getting pregnant, although my doctor readily admitted that may not be possible depending on the location of the endometriosis. At that point in my life, medication to help slow down the growth of endometriosis seemed my best option.

At 26, I was in a long-term relationship and ready to be married. Jim and I had many long conversations about the possibility of not having biological children. There was no doubt in our minds that we wanted children, and while Jim reassured me that we did not need to have biological children, the reality of not having a choice was ever present in our conversations.

Knowing that infertility was a reality, Jim and I were able to get a head start on the dreaded tests and operations before we were married. Following laser surgery the doctor said my best chances

**"We had to look long and hard at our reasons for wanting to conceive a biological child and how much we were willing to go through to do so."**

**"One of the most valuable resources for us during this time was the support of a small group of other infertile**

of getting pregnant were within the next six months, and we weren't getting married for three of those months. Admittedly, it was a stressful start to the covenant of marriage!

For the next 13 months we continued to undergo a battery of tests and probes to make sure I was the only one with the problem. I remember on my "bad" days, thinking how much easier it would be if the infertility wasn't just "my problem." While Jim assured me it was indeed "our" problem, I nevertheless struggled with feelings of guilt. I marveled (and cried) at stories of my friends' "surprise" pregnancies, wondering how that could be possible without taking their temperatures daily to determine ovulation!

We continued to talk about the timing factor related to our infertility. Somehow talking about next steps helped us feel somewhat in control of our lives, something infertility had taken from us. We asked ourselves how long we should continue going through expensive and intrusive tests. Our income was limited since Jim was in seminary. Our insurance did not cover some of our monthly tests. We realized, however, that it was a critical and traumatic step in the grieving process to make the decision to stop medical procedures. Somehow we were able to maintain hope amidst the devastation of each month's unproductive cycle. And while we talked about alternatives, we realized that we each needed to come to the decision individually not to pursue treatment as long as we had the available resources.

We continued to struggle, however, with the "what ifs" as our doctor talked about more extensive procedures. We weren't sure how far we would take the medical procedures necessary to increase our chances of becoming pregnant. We had to look long and hard at our reasons for wanting to conceive a biological child and how much we were willing to go through to do so. We did seriously discuss "how long" we would pursue medical treatment; we moved in the direction of deciding that once Jim completed seminary and we moved away from the geographical area where we were living, we would not search for a new infertility doctor and we would pursue adoption alternatives.

One of the most valuable resources for us during this time was the support of a small group of other infertile couples. We were brought together by a mutual acquaintance who knew each of our circumstances and invited each couple to her house to meet one another. We discovered at that initial

meeting that we were all being treated by the same specialist. While the bond between us was indeed special, it was a tenuous one constantly threatened by the overshadowing realization that at any time one couple could become pregnant. It was, however, freeing to be in a group where we could be honest and open with one another about the pain we experienced. We could talk about how it felt to go to church on Mother's Day, Father's Day or baby dedication Sunday and understand when someone had simply chosen to stay home that day.

My menstrual cycles were as regular as clock-work; I remember calling the doctor once when I was three days late and asking the nurse if it was too early to tell if I was pregnant. She told me to come to the office immediately for a test. It was one of the longest 10-minute drives of my life. The nurse we had gotten to know so well asked me to sit in the doctor's office while waiting for results. I can still picture her walking through the door with tears in her eyes as she showed me the blue dot on the test tube.

The next nine months were an incredible journey of disbelief and joy tempered with fear since our doctor informed us that I was also high-risk for miscarriage. It wasn't until several weeks before Solomon's birth that Jim announced one day that he thought it was time to get the nursery ready. We were so nervous about losing this baby that we continued to put any baby gifts "in the guest room" until the birth was a reality.

Going through the infertility process has been a life-changing experience for me. It has increased my awareness of, and sensitivity to, the journey of others. It continually amazes me that we have three beautiful children. I try not to take that for granted; most days I succeed. (In my case, the pregnancy did indeed "cure" my endometriosis and we conceived two children without going through further fertility procedures.)

The experience of infertility is a chapter of my life I don't think I'll ever be able to forget, nor want to forget. The things we learned about each other and ourselves during that challenging and painful period help me to stay connected with others in their pain. The journey from that first ultrasound to the delivery room was bittersweet and often filled with tears. As others share their stories of infertility, the memories and lessons learned are never far from the surface.

**Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz is the mother of Solomon, Jordan and Leah. She is staff associate for MCC's Office on Crime and Justice and just completed her first year of a master's in social work program. She and her husband, Jim, live in Quakertown, Pa.**

“... the couple needs freedom to be angry at God; it's part of healing.”

## Suggested Resources

*No Child in my Life*, by Regina Sara Ryan, Stillpoint Publishers, includes journaling exercises to help those who grieve the absence of a child, whether due to infertility or other circumstances. Order by calling 1-800-847-4014.

*Give us a Child: Coping with the Personal Crisis of Infertility*, by Lynda Stephenson, Zondervan Publishing House, offers insights into the trauma of infertility for those trying to understand their experience or a loved one better.

*Adopting After Infertility*, by Patricia Irwin Johnston, Perspectives Press, helps couples learn about themselves as they learn about adoption and decide whether or not to pursue it; it includes discussion about what dreams adoption can and cannot fulfill for the infertile couple.

*Sweet Grapes: How to Stop Being Infertile and Start Living Again*, by Jean W. Carter and Michael Carter, Perspectives Press.

RESOLVE, Inc., is a national organization providing education, advocacy and support for infertile couples. To learn about their resources and a local chapter, contact the national headquarters at 1310 Broadway, Somerville MA 02144-1731; helpline (617) 623-0744.

by Andrea Schrock Wenger

## Twelve things the church can do

Reportedly, one in six North American couples experiences infertility. It is likely that most North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ congregations are home to couples struggling with infertility. Here are 12 ways the church can support them.

### 1. Offer empathy.

During an especially difficult time for me, my sister checked a book out of the library describing one person's experience with infertility. "I wanted to try and understand how you're feeling," she told me. Another friend cried after I told her of a miscarriage. Knowing others shared my pain helped.

### 2. Avoid giving advice.

Some advice is not only annoying, it's not true. Saying, "Just relax, you're trying too hard" is an example. Infertility causes stress; stress does not cause infertility. "Why don't you 'just adopt'?" is another piece of advice best left unsaid. Couples must grieve their inability to give birth to a child before beginning the adoption process.

### 3. Let the couple grieve.

They are going through a legitimate grieving process. Not only must they grieve the loss of each unsuccessful month of trying or failed procedure, but they need to grieve the fact that life is turning out different than they had expected it would be. Avoid urging them to "look at the bright side" of not having kids. To begin a healthy healing process, the infertile couple needs to feel and express their pain.

### 4. Let them question God.

"If God is in control, why is this happening to me?" "Wouldn't I make a better mother than this teenager in the mall? Can't God see that?" Try not to offer pithy answers such as, "God only gives you as much as you can handle," and "God must know you're not ready to be a parent." Right now the couple needs freedom to be angry at God; it's part of healing.



**"Rage and jealousy are common. You may not enjoy being around the couple at these times. They probably don't like who they've become either."**

**"Rituals publicly mark many of the transitions in our lives. Many infertile people have found healing in participating in private or public rituals that acknowledge the progress of their lives."**

**5. Pray for them.**

Even though they may be wondering how God fits into their pain, the couple will value your prayers. When I was most doubtful about God's presence, I still found comfort in friends' prayers that we would be surrounded by supportive friends and find a way to accept whatever path our journey took.

**6. Be forgiving.**

The ups and downs of infertility, often referred to as an emotional roller coaster, are exhausting. People struggling with infertility experience soaring hopes and plunging disappointment month after month. Rage and jealousy are common. You may not enjoy being around the couple at these times. They probably don't like who they've become either.

**7. Ask questions.**

It is awkward for the couple to know when it is appropriate to talk. But sharing stories is healing; people experiencing infertility need to talk. Within the safety of a small group ask how they are doing. If they want to talk, they will pick up on your invitation; if they don't want to talk they need to be responsible to say, "Thanks, but I'd rather not talk about it now."

**8. Allow the couple to skip church.**

Some Sundays, such as Mother's/Father's Day and parent-child dedications, may simply be too painful. Baby showers and birthday parties are also awkward at best and devastating at worst. Invite the couple to those gatherings. If they choose not to attend, see it as a way they are choosing to care for themselves.

**9. Be aware of Scriptural references to barrenness.**

The Bible was written in a time when infertility was considered a woman's problem. In reality, infertility is found to be a female problem only 35 percent of the time. It is found to be a male problem another 35 percent of the time, a combined problem 20 percent and unattributable 10 percent of the time.

**10. Respect their pain when you share your news.**

How awkward to find yourself joyously pregnant, but in a small group with an infertile couple. Don't feel obligated to be miserable for their sakes. But do give them a call before you announce your news; they can choose to stay home or at least prepare emotionally for your announcement in a public setting.

**11. Start a support group.**

Check with those in your church experiencing infertility to see if they would find a church-based support group helpful. Group members could include close friends, people who have resolved their inability to have children, those who have recently grieved the death of a loved one, or others who have experienced a life dramatically different from what they had envisioned it would be.

**12. Create rituals to mark the experience.**

Rituals publicly mark many of the transitions in our lives, such as weddings, funerals, graduations and going-away parties. Many infertile people have found healing in participating in private or public rituals that acknowledge the progress of their lives. Planting a tree or burying a symbol of the child who would have been can provide the couple, as well as family and friends, an important release. The ritual will validate the couple's grief and may help them move on.



Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

### Women in ministry

**Grace and Paul Brunner** began September 1 as interim pastors at Trinity Mennonite Church, Glendale, Az.

**Wendy Miller** was ordained on August 9 as campus minister at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, Va.

**Mayra Pagán** was licensed on August 10 for Hispanic ministry at Ridgeway Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va.

**Sylvia Shirk Charles** was ordained June 29 at Waterford Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind., to serve as student pastor at Goshen College.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Gwen Groff. Layout by Beth Oberholtzer.

Subscription cost is \$12 U.S./\$15 Cdn. for one year or \$20 U.S./\$25 Cdn. for two years. Send all subscriptions, correspondence and address changes to Editor, MCC Women's Concerns, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; telephone 717-859-3889; fax 717-859-3875. Canadian subscribers may pay in Canadian currency.

This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.



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## News and verbs

Women in Mission and WMSC have jointly published a new **Bible study guide**, "Sent into God's World." The author is Helen Dueck, a GC missions worker who has served in four South American countries.

Anne Nuefeld Rupp is author of a new Faith and Life press publication, ***Growing Together: Understanding and Nurturing Your Child's Faith Journey***. Order by calling 800-743-2484.

Seven women and three men participated this past summer in the **ministry inquiry program**, a Goshen (Ind.) College program designed to give students a first-hand look at the pastorate.

Women in Mission (GC) has the following **new officers**: Liz Klassen of Kitchener, Ont., president; Louise Auernheimer of Reedley, Calif., secretary; and Candi Dietterich of Andover, Kan., publications committee representative.

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